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The Irish Times - Thursday, October 11, 2012

Dancing on the edge of vertigo



[Dancing or dangling: Echo Echo Dance Theatre performing The Cove. Photograph: Sarah Bryden](#)

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MICHAEL SEAVER

CLIMBING MIGHT be a sport and a pastime, but for some it is a purely aesthetic experience, bordering on the spiritual. For them, the goal isn't just to conquer the peak, but to revel in the very act of climbing: the moment-to-moment decisions that guide foot to crevice and hand to crack, the shifts in weight and the beauty of the line of the climb. Others, called free climbers, are driven by a more radical credo.

They seek to reclaim public spaces, like graffittists and skateboarders, by secretly scaling buildings in urban

settings.

Last year, choreographer Steve Batts, visual artist Dan Shipsides and dancers from Echo Echo Dance Company camped out in a sheltered cove, Port-a-Doris, near Shroove in Co Donegal. to investigate artistic common ground between climbing and dance. Two days spent ascending the cliff-face and choreographing movement led to an installation and performance called Vertical Nature Base. That has now developed into The Cove, a dance theatre production for eight female dancers with a dramatic set designed by Shipsides.

The idea came from a shared interest in climbing and evolved through support offered by the Legacy Trust, an independent charity set up to encourage arts and sports partnerships and create a cultural and sporting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

“For me art is about inquiry,” says Shipsides. “It’s about changing perspectives and finding out what else becomes visible when I create something. And that’s what I discover in climbing. I can go in and out of different states. At times I might have to reduce my focus on to a detail in the rock and at other times I notice the wind or the view, but my perspective is changing all the time.”

Danger is ever-present and central to climbing philosophy. Whether one climbs for self-discovery, fame, spirituality or to belong to an elite group, the possibility of death is what heightens the experience.

“That basic existential question is always there,” Batts says. “Are you climbing because you are repressing the existential danger or because you are constantly aware of it?” He witnessed a bad accident at an indoor climbing wall a few years ago and it intensified his fear. He stopped climbing for few years and even now will always have someone else check his harness before a climb.

These kinds of safety precautions are spurned by a climbing subculture that prefers to scale buildings and walls wearing just sneakers and street clothes. Called buildering, it has a kin with alternative urban pursuits such as free-running or parkour. It also shares their radical philosophies of promoting freedom from conformity and combating the increased privatisation and surveillance of urban spaces.

Buildering’s origins predate our CCTVed cities. In 1899, Geoffrey Winthrop Young published the first handbook, *The Roof Climbers’ Guide to Trinity*. A manual for climbing Cambridge’s highest spires and rooftops, it was coveted by students and led to an increase in night climbing, a trend captured in a subsequent book, *The Night Climbers of Cambridge*, written in 1927 under the pseudonym “Whipplesnaith.”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the new skyscrapers of New York and Chicago led to more stegophily (the love or practice of climbing tall buildings). “Human flies” scaled their sheer sides often to publicise a product or event. Ever taller buildings meant ever greater challenges: three years after “Man on Wire” Philippe Petit walked between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in 1974, George Willig climbed the South Tower, and in 1983 Dan Goodwin climbed the North Tower; both used suction cups.

These days Alain Robert, known as the “French Spider-Man”, is regarded either as the world’s greatest climber by builderers or a foolhardy exhibitionist by conventional climbers.

Robert has climbed more than 80 skyscrapers, mostly with no equipment except climbing shoes and a bag of powdered chalk for his hands. In the documentary *Legend of the Spider-Man*, he says: “You feel alive when you’re in danger. And when you’ve succeeded, when you’re at the top, you have the impression of being reborn. You have the feeling of having begun another life.”

While he acknowledges Robert’s climbs are “amazing physical feats”, Shipsides claims there is a constant repetition in Robert’s climbs and he doesn’t face the same questions of adaptation and reaction that rock climbers do.

The various approaches to rock climbers’ ever-present dilemmas evolve into schools of thought within climbing, with some adopting a highly physical approach and others, such as Johnny Dawes (the “nutty

professor” of climbing), a more psychological approach. He calls climbing “falling upwards” and describes the rock in an almost spiritual way, how it gives him messages and creates a music that makes him dance.

According to Shippides, these approaches reflect the corresponding cultural shifts of their times and can be aligned with more general artistic trends.

His own credo? “I’m in the slightly nerdy, introspective camp,” he says, an approach that has led him to find deeper connections between climbing and dance than just sweat and strength.

The Cove tours until October 17th . More information at echochodance.com

Free-climbing spirits

TODAY’S urban climbers have unlikely heroes: the elite students of 1920s Cambridge. According to Jon Gifford of Oleander Press, which republished The Night Climbers of Cambridge in 2007, this was a lost generation who lived in the shadow of one World War and the likelihood of another.

“The climbing wasn’t just about transformation, challenge and achievement, and taking huge risks,” he says. “It was about pushing the envelope, finding oneself through extraordinary accomplishment, and trying to make sense of a nonsensical time and one’s place or purpose within it.”

Describing the Kings College Chapel, the anonymous author Whipplesnaith writes, “as you pass round each pillar, the whole of your body, except your hands and feet, are over black emptiness. Your feet are on slabs of stone sloping downwards and outwards at an angle of about 35 degrees to the horizontal, your fingers and elbows making the most of a friction-hold against a vertical pillar, and the ground is precisely 100 feet directly below you. If you slip, you will still have three seconds to live.”

Although climbers were photographed with cumbersome cameras and flashes, they mostly avoided detection from college authorities and police. The illegality added to the sense of danger and was “the sap which gives roof-climbing its sweetness”.

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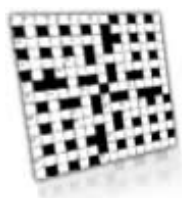
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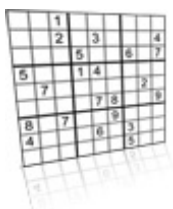
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